

## Herakles the Savior and the “Tragi-comic” in Sophokles’ *Philoktetes*

Little scholarly attention has been paid to the role of the deified Herakles in Greek tragedy. The mortal Herakles, after all, is usually thought of as a comic rather than tragic figure, and his labors have been seen as “too lacking in obviously profound content to be intensely dramatic” (Kirk 1974: 203). Further, because he became a god after his death Herakles has been called “essentially untragic” (Ehrenberg 1973/[1946]: 146). Such assessments are problematic when we consider that several recent studies have cautioned us against conflating “the tragic” with tragedy as a genre, in part since many extant examples of tragedy include what we would consider untragic (cf. Most 2000, Allan 2008: 66-72). With that in mind, in this paper I wish to explore what the deified Herakles, particularly in his “comic” aspect, brings to Sophokles’ tragedy, the *Philoktetes*.

I take as a starting point the depiction of Herakles in Euripides’ *Alkestis*, a play which was staged fourth in competition—the usual position of a satyr play in a tragedian’s tetralogy—and is frequently identified as “pro-satyrical” (cf. Sutton 1980: 145-158). Here Herakles appears as a comic buffoon: he drinks to excess and praises above all Aphrodite’s pleasures. But concomitant with this excessive physicality is a superhuman strength that allows him to out-wrestle Death and bring the play’s departed heroine back to life. This super-physicality is standard in comic representations of the deified Herakles also, as in Aristophanes’ *Birds* (1574ff.) and Kallimachos’ *Hymn to Artemis* (146-160), and his role as a buffoonish savior is likewise well-attested by comic and satyrical fragments and testimony.

Turning to the *Philoktetes*: the eponymous hero of that play has spent ten years on the deserted island of Lemnos in a death-like state of existence: those heroes at Troy he most closely identifies with are long dead (410-452), and his own *kleos* is, at best, only a “rumor” of his suffering (249-256). Philoktetes’ single desire is to return home to see his father—even if it means following him to Hades (1204-1213)—at the expense of his *kleos* (1344-1349). At the end of the play, he and Neoptolemos are set to sail from Lemnos to Philoktetes’ home in Malia (1402ff.). This journey, according to Philoktetes, will be his “salvation” (311, 501); in fact, by all indications, this unheroic path would result in what is essentially the death of his *kleos*. Herakles appears in time, however, to prevent Philoktetes from taking that disastrous path (1416), and to restore him on the road to *eukleia* (1421-1422). In a speech which closely associates his own fate with Philoktetes’, Herakles promises to revive him, offering him restoration to society, healing of his wounds and the closest thing to his own “immortal *arete*” (1420) Philoktetes can attain: a life of heroic fame. This promise of restoration complements the conclusion of Euripides’ *Herakleidae*, where Herakles and Hebe appear in epiphany to rejuvenate Iolaos to his former heroism (*Hkld.* 843-866).

In short, Herakles as *deus ex machina* in the *Philoktetes* is far more than, as Silk deems him, a “saviour” of the plot, “who appears at the end to cut the tragic knot” (1985: 4). Instead, Herakles rescues Philoktetes from a tragic end as a would-be hero who dies in obscurity; I argue that this “comic” resolution is consistent with representations of Herakles as savior in the *Alkestis* and elsewhere.

## Works Cited

- Allan, William, ed. 2008. *Euripides: Helen*. Cambridge Greek and Latin Classics. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ehrenberg, Victor. 1973/[1946]. *Aspects of the Ancient World: Essays and Reviews*. New York: Arno Press.
- Kirk, G. S. 1974. *The Nature of Greek Myths*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Most, Glenn W. 2000. "Generating Genres: The Idea of the Tragic." In *Matrices of Genre: Authors, Canons, and Society*, edited by M. Depew and D. Obbink: Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press: 15-35.
- Silk, M. S. 1985. "Heracles and Greek Tragedy." *Greece and Rome; Second Series* 32: 1-22.
- Sutton, Dana. 1980. *The Greek Satyr Play*. Edited by E. Heitsch, R. Merkelbach and C. Zintzen, *Beiträge zur klassischen Philologie* 90. Meisenheim: Anton Hain.